



## DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

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To the Editor:

Louisiana, along with its Gulf Coast neighbors experienced an unprecedented natural disaster when Hurricane Katrina came ashore in late August. Along with the human tragedies, the storm left in its wake more than 22 million tons of debris that must be collected and disposed of or recycled. The Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), EPA, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers working through FEMA have been working thoughtfully and tirelessly to address the massive accumulations of debris so that the impacted areas could quickly begin to recover.

Thus, it was extremely disappointing to read the obviously slanted reporting and editorializing that was posed as journalism in Manuel Roig-Franzia's article, "Hurricane Bends Landfill Rules" of October 29th in the Washington Post.

It would be nice to have the print space to respond to all of Roig-Franzia's inaccurate and misleading statements. For this letter, though, I will focus on the most egregious departures from reality.

Mr. Roig-Franzia's writing would have you believe that the formerly closed Old Gentilly Landfill located in Orleans Parish was reopened to take Katrina debris, that it was environmentally unsound for debris disposal, that rules were bent for its use, and that there were more modern landfills available for the waste.

The facts are that the City of New Orleans turned in a permit application to our agency for the Old Gentilly Landfill to accept construction and demolition (C&D) wastes more than two years ago. Over a 2-year period DEQ worked with the city, taking samples from the landfill and ensuring the permit was technically sound. The permit was issued in December 2004. As the law requires, the public was given an opportunity to comment during the permitting process. After receiving no comments opposing the landfill, in December the department went forward and issued the permit. So, an old landfill was not reopened to take hurricane debris as the reporter suggested and environmental laws were not relaxed during the permitting process.

Again, the reporter writes, referring to DEQ's Dr. Chuck Brown, "...the process accelerated after Katrina, and many of the state-imposed requirements -- such as the types of waste that could be deposited and a mandate to build perimeter fencing -- vanished with a single stroke of Brown's pen on Sept. 29, a month after the storm."

This statement is also inaccurate. As explained to Roig-Franzia by Dr. Brown repeatedly (but failed to make its way into the article) is the fact that materials such as carpet, furniture and mattresses are currently allowed into a C&D landfill because of an Emergency Declaration signed by me as Secretary of DEQ. This was done because of the excessively large amount of debris, more than 22 million tons, and the time it would take to separate the non-hazardous materials that were not previously permitted to a C&D landfill. These materials do not pose a threat to the environment or human health and are commingled with much of the other demolition debris. Other materials, such as refrigerators, air conditioners and household hazardous wastes are separated at the landfill and sent to the properly permitted facility to be disposed of or recycled.

If the Old Gentilly Landfill were not in operation, the nearest landfill that would be allowed to take construction and demolition waste would be nearly 30 miles away. That may seem nearby to Roig-Franzia, but to move many millions of tons of debris, through heavy traffic areas within New Orleans to be processed at a facility nearly 30 miles away would be inefficient and environmentally unsound. Hundreds of trucks would have to travel farther, consume more fuel, create more emissions, and wait several hours before their load could be processed, then turn around and drive the 30 miles back to pick up another load. This process would considerably extend the period of cleanup and disposal of debris, and ultimately delay the recovery of the region for which we are all working so hard.

No one cares more about Louisiana's environment more than those of us who live and work here and who are charged with its stewardship. We can assure the public that DEQ will not create an environmental hazard while we manage the cleanup of this nation's worst environmental disaster.

Mike D. McDaniel, Ph.D.

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